



Palestinians Sidelined in Saudi-Emirati Rapprochement with Israel

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This essay examines how and why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have pursued policies that have aligned closer to Israel since 2011. The disruptive impact of the Arab Spring and its turbulent aftermath altered threat perceptions in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which increasingly saw Islamist movements and Iran as the major sources of regional instability. For Saudi and Emirati leaders committed to adopting a more forceful approach to shaping the post-Arab Spring landscape, Israel no longer represented the primary fissure in Middle Eastern politics. Although the process of creating informal ties between the Gulf states and Israel has been decades in the making, the nature of the post-2011 connections between Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel have greater strategic depth and are taking place in a far more open setting than ever before.

A REALIGNMENT of political and strategic interests is reshaping some of the fault lines that for decades have impacted the Middle East. The cathartic shock of the Arab Spring upheaval that shook the region in 2011 has altered threat perceptions in capitals such as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and it has led a new generation of leaders in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to adopt more forceful regional stances. A shared belief that Iran and Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood are the greatest challenge to stability and security has bound together Saudi and Emirati leaders with their Israeli counterparts. While all Gulf states have maintained discreet and under-the-radar contacts with Israel since at least the 1990s, the scale and visibility of Saudi and Emirati interaction has risen considerably in recent years. Faced with common foes in a changing regional landscape, officials from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel increasingly choose to focus on the issues that bring them together rather than those that keep them apart.

Uncompromising Support for the Palestinians

Official hostility toward Israel was a hallmark of regional policy for years after the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 and the UAE federation in 1971. Support for Palestine took political, financial, and rhetorical forms. During the reign of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (1964–75), Saudi Arabia provided millions of dollars to Palestinian groups

and established pan-Islamic organizations that provided an international platform and institutional support to Palestinian issues. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference pushed for Palestinian recognition at the United Nations in 1974–75 and Faisal himself declared in 1972 that “all countries should wage war against the Zionists, who are there to destroy all human organizations and to destroy civilization.”¹ After his assassination in 1975, Faisal’s half brothers continued their patronage of charitable and humanitarian groups until the flows of funding came in for intense U.S. scrutiny in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Long-serving interior minister Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ran the Saudi Committee for Supporting al-Quds Intifada while his brother (and future king) Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud led a charity named the Popular Committee for Assisting the Palestinian Mujahideen.²

In Abu Dhabi, the founding father of the newly formed UAE, Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, pursued a similarly uncompromising approach that made support for the Palestinians the cornerstone of the new state’s emerging foreign policy. In April 1971, Shaykh Zayed told the *Akhbar al-Youm* newspaper that “Israel’s policy of expansion and racist plans of Zionism are directed against all Arab countries. . . . No Arab country is safe from the perils of the battle with Zionism unless it plays its role and bears its responsibilities, in confronting the Israeli enemy.”³ The UAE participated in the Arab oil embargo between October 1973 and March 1974 (although Dubai only joined three days after Abu Dhabi did) and provided the so-called frontline states in the Arab-Israeli conflict with wide-ranging support that included medical supplies and funding for European journalists to visit “the Arab side of the conflict.”⁴ Explaining the UAE’s participation in the Arab oil embargo, Shaykh Zayed stated in October 1973 that “if Arab land continues to be occupied and subject to aggression, we will use every weapon we possess, and first of all oil, to liberate our land.”⁵

During the 1970s, more than half of all the overseas development assistance provided by Gulf countries went to the frontline states of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, including much of the support that was ultimately destined for Palestinians.⁶ Shaykh Zayed himself stated, “Any aid we supply to any Arab country is in fact aid for the Emiratis and our Arab motherland” and added, on a different occasion, that “We, in the United Arab Emirates, are prepared to work night and day to put all our human and material resources at the disposal of the force of our Arab brothers.”⁷ The climate of hostility among the Gulf states persisted until well into the 1990s and only began to erode with the generational shift in leadership caused by the passing of the founding fathers. Not for the only time, the outlier in this position was Oman, which publicly supported Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s negotiations and subsequent peace treaty with Israel in 1978. Oman was ostracized by its Gulf neighbors after it became one of only three Arab states not to break diplomatic relations with Egypt following the ratification of the Camp David Accords in 1979 or attend the so-called rejectionist Arab League summit held shortly afterwards in Baghdad to condemn the Egyptian decision.⁸

Early Contacts with Israel

Diplomatic contacts between Israel and the Gulf states began tentatively after the 1991 Madrid Conference on Arab-Israeli peace. All six Gulf Cooperation Council⁹ (GCC) states participated in

the peace conference and Saudi officials joined with their Egyptian counterparts to pressure Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasir Arafat and Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad to attend. By doing so, the two leaders accepted the Madrid framework of direct and bilateral Arab negotiations with Israel.¹⁰ Moreover, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar all hosted working group sessions of the multilateral committees established after the Madrid conference. One year after the signing of the Oslo I Accord on 13 September 1993, the GCC ended their secondary and tertiary boycotts of companies doing business with Israel, stating that Israel's peace agreements with Jordan and the Palestinians rendered the blacklist unnecessary.¹¹

It was not long before direct, if low-key, trading relations developed. Oman and Israel established trade offices in October 1995, ten months after Oman had become the first Gulf state to host a sitting Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, in December 1994.¹² Israel also opened a trade office in Doha in May 1996, one month after Rabin's successor, Prime Minister Shimon Peres, visited Qatar.¹³ In November 1997, Qatar displayed an early instance of its independent streak as it refused to cancel a Middle East and North Africa Economic Conference in Doha in the face of concerted pressure from across the Arab world to withdraw Israel's invitation to participate. Qatari leaders insisted on their right to formulate an autonomous foreign policy and invite whomever they wished, provoking the ire of Saudi Arabia and Egypt.¹⁴ Israel subsequently maintained a token presence at its Doha mission until the Qatari government closed it permanently in January 2009 in protest at the offensive that Israel had launched against Gaza in December 2008.¹⁵

In addition to the abovementioned Israeli trade offices in Muscat and Doha in the 1990s, relations between Israel and the UAE improved after the passing of Shaykh Zayed in November 2004, and the growth of trade with Dubai, in particular, included a joint venture between Dubai's DP World and Israel's largest shipping firm, Zim Integrated Shipping Services.¹⁶ This association bore unexpected geopolitical fruit in early 2006 in the midst of a political firestorm in the United States that followed DP World's acquisition of a contract to run cargo operations in major U.S. ports. With DP World (and, by extension, Dubai and the UAE) being portrayed, implausibly, as potential threats to U.S. national security, Zim's Israeli CEO became a vocal defender of the Emirati firm. In an open letter to then New York senator Hillary Clinton, Idon Ofer criticized the "misinformation about DP World in the U.S. media," adding, "As an Israeli company . . . we are very comfortable calling at DP World's Dubai ports."¹⁷

The streak of pragmatism that animated the softening of the Gulf stance toward Israel admittedly was far more apparent at the policymaking level than among public opinion in GCC states. Notwithstanding the restrictions on political expression and media commentary, with the partial exception of Kuwait and its vocal parliamentarians and relatively freer press, public sentiment in those countries remained vulnerable to the periodic upticks in violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel's so-called second Lebanon war to quash Hezbollah in July 2006 also provoked outrage in Gulf (and other Arab) states where, besides Qatar, leaders felt rattled by public displays of support for Hezbollah and, by extension, Iran. Similar concerns were again evident three years later when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait refused to attend an Arab summit meeting hastily convened by the Qatari leadership in Doha in the wake of the Israeli offensive on Gaza in January 2009, and organized instead a rival summit in Riyadh. The dissenting countries expressed indignation at Qatar's support for Hamas, in an early example of the growing differences between

Qatar and its Gulf neighbors that subsequently burst into the open during and after the Arab Spring.¹⁸

As the Arab Spring was rocking the Middle East and North Africa in January 2011, the unofficial thaw in the attitudes of GCC policy elites toward Israel was evidenced in an interview with Spiegel Online in which Dubai's outspoken chief of police, Lieutenant General Dahi Khalfan Tamim, acknowledged, "We know that many Israelis come here with non-Israeli passports, and we treat them the way we treat anyone else. We protect their lives just as we protect the lives of others, and we don't concern ourselves with their religion."¹⁹

Tamim's comments came almost exactly a year after a team of twenty-seven operatives linked to Israel's Mossad intelligence agency carried out the audacious assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a chief weapons negotiator for the Palestinian resistance group, Hamas, in the Al Bustan Rotana hotel in Dubai.²⁰ The fallout from the assassination complicated but did not end the discreet connections with Israeli entities and individuals in the UAE, and underscored the new contours that were reshaping the geopolitical fault lines of the Middle East. While Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian issues remained capable of mobilizing passionate feelings on all sides they no longer represented the only defining fissures in the volatile post-2011 reordering of the political landscape in the Middle East—even though they might not have been buried as far underneath the surface of regional geopolitics as Israeli policymakers may sometimes have wished.

New Fault Lines in the Middle East

Just as there was no consistency in the impact of the Arab Spring across the region, there was no monolithic GCC-wide approach to the political upheaval that ensued. Bahrain was hit hardest by the protests and significant unrest also occurred in Saudi Arabia's historically volatile Eastern Province and in Kuwait well into 2012. Saudi and Emirati officials adopted a hawkish approach to the external threat to regional stability that they perceived to come both from Iran (in the case of Shi'i-led demonstrations in Bahrain and the Eastern Province) and from the Muslim Brotherhood (in the case of Sunni-centric protests in Kuwait and pressure for political reform in the UAE). Officials in Qatar, by contrast, embraced both the direction and the pace of change in the transition states that experienced regime overthrows in 2011, and they did not share their neighbors' alarm at the region-wide empowerment of political Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹

The impact of the upheaval triggered by the Arab Spring reframed the major fault lines in Middle Eastern politics. Policymakers in GCC states sought to attribute the unrest in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf to "meddling" by external actors in an attempt, in part, to deflect the focus from domestic issues as the root causes of political discontent or economic grievance. Thus, officials in the GCC attributed the uprising in Bahrain to Iranian interventionism and, when protests among Sunni Arabs escalated in Kuwait in 2012, they also accused the Muslim Brotherhood of seeking to topple the Gulf monarchies one by one, beginning with Kuwait.²² Sectarian politics flourished in the feverish post-Arab Spring atmosphere as tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalated and the contest for political leadership in transition states such as Egypt increasingly constituted a binary competition between Islamists, on the one hand, and advocates of the military-dominated status quo, on the other.²³

Against this backdrop, the rapprochement that significant sections of the Israeli military and security establishment had long wanted with the Gulf states took root as the post-Arab Spring landscape provided the opportunity to deepen unofficial ties in areas of shared concern. As with their counterparts in GCC capitals, Israeli officials acknowledge pragmatically that there are limits to how open such a relationship can be, and that absent any dramatic breakthrough in the Palestinian issue there is little likelihood of formal recognition by GCC states.²⁴

This, however, has not hindered the rise of a commonality of interest between Israeli and Gulf policymakers on several of the crucial issues that have risen to the surface of Middle Eastern politics over the past decade. These include the assumption that Iran represents an external threat to regional stability, both for the Arab world and for Israel, and that the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists pose a similar internal threat. In addition, policymakers in Israel expressed deep unease at what they viewed as U.S. “retrenchment” in the Middle East under the Obama administration, which they saw as undercutting the United States’ supporters and emboldening its enemies in the region, and displayed an almost-instinctive embrace of the Trump presidency, in language that was strikingly similar to that in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.²⁵

In January 2016, Israel’s former ambassador to Egypt, Zvi Mazel, alluded to the strategic convergence of Israeli-Gulf interests, if not values. “During the Iran nuclear talks, Israel’s intelligence community started having more effective ties with Gulf countries. . . . The Emirates have ties with us due to our common security interests against Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. . . . You can definitely sense that in certain fields the Gulf countries and Israel are becoming closer,” he told Middle East Eye.²⁶

Overt but Unofficial Cooperation

In a similar vein, a former head of policy planning at the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs noted that by 2009 “it was clear that senior professionals in the intelligence and security fields from Israel and the Gulf countries were collaborating but that does not mean that any major diplomatic advancement took place.”²⁷ However limited cooperation may have been, it set a precedent for additional “collaboration” in the twenty months from the announcement of the international nuclear negotiations with Iran in November 2013 and the actual agreement signed in July 2015.²⁸ During this period, Eran Etzion claimed, “there were definitely cases of coordination” among Saudi and GCC policymakers in Washington, as “an Israeli delegation could come to lobby against the agreement and, coincidentally, a few weeks earlier the Saudi delegation would be there.”²⁹ In March 2015, Al Arabiya English went so far as to publish an op-ed by Faisal J. Abbas, titled “President Obama, Listen to Netanyahu on Iran,” in which the Saudi-owned news organization’s editor in chief provided a neat summary of the convergence of thinking between Gulf Arab and Israeli circles:

The Israeli PM managed to hit the nail right on the head when he said that Middle Eastern countries are collapsing and that “terror organizations, mostly backed by Iran, are filling in the vacuum.” . . . In just a few words, Mr. Netanyahu managed to accurately summarize a clear and present danger, not just to Israel (which obviously is his concern), but to other U.S. allies in the

region. . . . What is absurd, however, is that despite this being perhaps the only thing that brings together Arabs and Israelis (as it threatens them all), the only stakeholder that seems not to realize the danger of the situation is President Obama.³⁰

It is thus unsurprising that the post-2011 conditions of regional insecurity have meant that the defense and security sectors have grown into a microcosm of the evolving dynamic of Gulf-Israel ties. One of the earliest such connections dates to 2008 when Abu Dhabi's Critical National Infrastructure Authority (CNIA) signed an \$816 million contract with AGT International, a Geneva-based company owned by Israeli businessman Mati Kochavi, for surveillance equipment for critical infrastructure in the UAE, including oil and gas fields.³¹ In 2011, the CNIA then agreed to purchase unmanned aerial vehicles from Israel's Aeronautics Defense Systems (ADS) although the deal foundered acrimoniously after the military sales division of the Israeli Ministry of Defense failed to approve the export of the vehicles to an Arab state.³² Most recently, AGT International has been linked through a Swiss intermediary with a joint venture with two UAE firms, Advanced Integrated Systems and Advanced Technical Solutions, in a comprehensive emirate-wide surveillance initiative in Abu Dhabi named Falcon Eye.³³ Rumors have also persisted that GCC states might purchase an antimissile system from Raytheon modeled on Israel's Iron Dome, itself co-developed by Raytheon and the Israeli state-owned defense contractor Rafael Advanced Defense Systems, or even, one day, purchase arms and other forms of military, crowd control, and surveillance technology directly from Israel itself.³⁴

Quiet meetings between Saudi and Israeli officials, both active and retired, have also proliferated and a channel of communication has solidified between Anwar Eshki, a retired Saudi general who chairs the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Jeddah, and Dore Gold, the director general of the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs and one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's longest-serving and most trusted confidantes.³⁵ The two men have met on more than half a dozen occasions in a series of "track-two" meetings to discuss the challenge from Iran and other regional security issues,³⁶ and it was Eshki who led the Saudi delegation to Israel in July 2016 that met with Gold and, among others, Major General Yoav Mordechai, the most senior official responsible for implementing Israeli government policy in the Palestinian territories. "Circumstances have changed" in the geopolitics of the region, Eshki told the Tel Aviv-based newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* the month before his visit to Israel, adding that "today we can easily single out common enemies."³⁷ Appearing with Eshki at the Washington office of the Council on Foreign Relations in June 2015, Gold had, for his part, expressed the hope that such meetings constituted "the beginning of more discussion about our common strategic problems."³⁸

Other developments also suggest a softening of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, albeit at a series of unofficial, non-state-led levels. Following the killing of four people in a shooting attack in Tel Aviv in June 2016, Al Arabiya, the Saudi-owned pan-Arab news network, attracted attention (and some criticism among its viewers) for its strong criticism of the attack while a senior member of the Saudi Journalists Association wrote on Twitter, "The Tel Aviv attack is terror and thuggery. Our solidarity and support for the Palestinian people does not mean that we accept the killing of innocents and civilians. We would like to extend our condolences to the families of the victims."³⁹ Israeli observers of Saudi media also detected a spate of articles that appeared in the wake of the

Eshki delegation's visit to Israel that appeared to indicate a campaign to tone down Saudi anti-Semitism and reflexive hostility to Jews and to Israel. The *Times of Israel* suggested this reflected "an effort to prepare public opinion for deepened relations with [the] decades-old enemy."⁴⁰

At a more official state-to-state level, Israel was believed to have given its blessing to the controversial transfer of two islands in the Red Sea from Egypt to Saudi Arabia in April 2016, and both Israeli and Saudi officials view the reassertion of the military-authoritarian grip over Egypt as an important anchor of regional stability.⁴¹ However, in the absence of any meaningful re-engagement with the Palestinian peace process, Israeli and Gulf officials also acknowledge that it will be difficult to expand the fledgling and discreet contacts into a fully fledged and open diplomatic relationship. The increased willingness of officials in Tel Aviv and in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to explore the parameters of common interest rather than to seek a formal diplomatic breakthrough suggests a less strident and more pragmatic assessment of the possibilities for (and limitations to) a way forward. Integral to this approach is the consensus that Iran and Islamism pose the largest and most immediate threats to regional stability and the convergence of views by officials who feel emboldened under the Trump administration to take matters into their own hands in dealing with regional issues.

Rapprochement in the Age of Trump

Policymaking since January 2017 has become more volatile and unpredictable as Saudi, Israeli, and Emirati leaders all reacted to Donald Trump's surprising election as U.S. president by reaching out to the incoming administration and seeking to shape its approach to regional affairs. Perhaps uniquely in recent history, the president and inner circle who took office lacked a background in public policy and experience in governing, and the chaotic transition and opening weeks fostered a feeling that policymaking would be more transactional and less values based than ever before. Against the febrile backdrop of senior presidential advisor Stephen Bannon's call for "the deconstruction of the administrative state," early decision-making was personalized to a degree unprecedented in modern U.S. history, and influence increasingly came to revolve around access to the president and his core team. Both Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh and Mohammed bin Zayed in Abu Dhabi reacted quickly to the new disposition of authority in Washington, embarking on audacious efforts to project influence within the Trump administration that began before it even took office and that may, allegedly, have extended to attempts to influence the course of the presidential election itself in 2016.⁴²

On his first visit to the United States since becoming crown prince of Saudi Arabia in June 2017, Mohammed bin Salman reportedly met with U.S. Jewish leaders in New York in March 2018 and stated that "the Palestinian issue is not at the top of the Saudi government's agenda. . . . There are much more urgent and more important issues to deal with, such as Iran."⁴³ In addition, the crown prince was said by attendees at the meeting to have used language that closely resembled that used in the past by Israeli leaders, namely that, "For the past forty years, the Palestinian leadership has missed opportunities again and again, and rejected all the offers it was given. It's about time that the Palestinians accept the offers and agree to come to the negotiating table—or they should shut up and stop complaining."⁴⁴ These comments reportedly caused a rift between

the crown prince and his father, King Salman, who remained steadfast in his support for the Palestinians and is believed to have cancelled a planned visit to Washington to meet with the U.S. president in protest at Trump's December 2017 announcement that the U.S. embassy in Israel would be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.⁴⁵

Rumors are abuzz that the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi are seeking to work with Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor Jared Kushner to force a "peace plan" onto the Palestinian leadership that would situate the capital of a future Palestinian state in the suburb of Abu Dis rather than in the Old City of Jerusalem itself. Specific details remained elusive after Kushner's visit to Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar in June 2018 to brief regional leaders, save only for a warning that the plan would be unveiled with or without Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas's engagement. The plan may additionally be accompanied by attempts to impose Mohammad Dahlan to enforce the settlement. (Formerly head of the post-Oslo Preventive Security Force and the leader of Fatah in Gaza in the 1990s and early 2000s, Dahlan is currently based in Abu Dhabi as a key advisor to Mohammed bin Zayed.)⁴⁶ Both eventualities would be highly divisive, and their chances of rejection increased by the failure to consult among Palestinian leaders, grassroots organizations, and communities to caucus support for the proposal. They nevertheless appeal to a president whose love of the limelight and the big occasion, and disregard for decision-making consequences, make the chance to sign the "Deal of the Century" recklessly appealing.⁴⁷ Mohammed bin Salman may act with a degree of caution so long as his father is still alive, but once eighty-two-year-old King Salman passes away any lingering constraints on the "new" Saudi state—in which all power and authority is concentrated in one man to a degree unprecedented in the modern history of Saudi Arabia—that he is putting in place will have been removed. When that moment comes, it is more likely than ever that leaders in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel will find themselves in the same trenches in terms of the fissures that have reshaped Middle Eastern politics since 2011.

About the Author

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